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# THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY

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## THE LATER TRADITION OF VERGIL

(Concluded from page 182)

But that which concerns us more nearly is the general reputation of Vergil himself in this long period of decline. It may be briefly described as a childish exaggeration of that which he had already acquired in the second century. The Middle Ages were marked by a still greater exaggeration in the same lines. As Comparetti says (Benecke, 74),

Those real qualities of learning which distinguished him, and which, even at an early period of his fame, had been gauged with considerable inaccuracy, had become by this time his only claim to distinction, and were, owing to the great prestige of his name, amplified and exaggerated according to the spirit of the age, which, under the influence of neo-Platonism and still more of Christianity, tended irresistibly towards symbolism, mysticism and allegory. The poets of the period could achieve but little. . . . The art of the greatest of Roman poets seemed to these people a mystery, the clue to which could only be found in vast and recondite learning. Hence, it was considered a sure proof of refined taste and superior erudition to be able to discover hidden in his verses scientific dicta and profound philosophical doctrines of every kind.

One or two examples of this tendency must suffice.

According to Comparetti (Benecke, 56), Donatus is quoted by Servius as saying that

. . . Vergil, in composing his works, followed an order corresponding to the life of man. The first condition of man was pastoral, and so Vergil wrote first of all the *Bucolics*; afterwards it was agricultural, and so he wrote next the *Georgics*. Then, as the number of the race increased, there grew up therewith the love of war; hence his final work is the *Aeneid*, which is full of wars.

Fulgentius, a writer of the sixth century, whose views would astonish a child of ten in these days, says that the real hidden subject of the first *Georgic* is astrology, of the second, physiognomy and medicine, of the third, augury, of the fourth, music. The twelve books of the *Aeneid* really depict the life of man. The shipwreck of Aeneas in the first book denotes the birth of man, who enters with pain and sorrow upon the storm of life. Juno, who brought about the storm, is the goddess of birth. Aeolus comes from the Greek, Αἰολός, and signifies perdition. Achates comes from the Greek, ἀχάων ἔθος, id est tristitiae consuetudo, and signifies the trouble of infancy. The song of Iopas is the song of the nurses, etc., etc.

This work, such as it is, is the most characteristic testimony we possess of Vergil's celebrity during this darkest period of Christian barbarism. The same sort of interpretation, which is no more unreasonable than our traditional interpretation of the Song of Solomon, and which was welcomed partly for the same cause, is carried down through the Middle Ages, and, in a sublimated form, finally appears in Dante.

But the most famous example of this method of interpretation is connected with the fourth *Eclogue*. This is really a poem of congratulation on the birth of a son, into which Vergil introduced the topic of the Ages of Man in accordance with the specific suggestion of the rhetoricians for poems of this type, and developed in strict conformity with the rules laid down by them<sup>2</sup>.

The following is Dryden's translation of a portion of the passage in question:

The last great age, foretold by sacred rhymes,  
Renews its finished course: Saturnian times  
Roll round again: and mighty years, begun  
From their first orb, in radiant circles run.  
The base degenerate iron offspring ends;  
A golden progeny from heaven descends.  
O Chaste Lucina! speed the mother's pains:  
And haste the glorious birth! thy own Apollo reign.  
The lovely boy with his auspicious face,  
Shall Pollio's consulship and triumph grace:  
Majestic months set out with him to their appointed  
race.  
The father banished virtue shall restore,  
And crime shall threat the guilty world no more.  
The son shall lead the life of gods, and be  
By gods and heroes seen, and gods and heroes see.  
The jarring nations he in peace shall bind,  
And with paternal virtues rule mankind.  
Unbidden, earth shall wreathing ivy bring  
And fragrant herbs, the promises of spring,  
As her first offerings to her infant king.

. . . . .  
The Fates, when they this happy web have spun,  
Shall bless the sacred clue, and bid it smoothly run.  
Mature in years, to ready honours move,  
O of celestial seed! O foster-son of Jove!  
See, labouring Nature calls thee to sustain  
The nodding frame of heaven, and earth, and main!  
See to their base restored, earth, seas, and air;  
And joyful ages, from behind, in crowding ranks appear.  
To sing thy praise, would heaven my breath prolong,  
Infusing spirits worthy such a song,

<sup>2</sup>Reference should be made here to Professor Smith's paper, *Ages of the World*, in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, 4. 192-200 (Edinburgh and New York, 1908), C. K.

Not Thracian Orpheus should transcend my lays,  
Nor Linus crowned with never fading bays;  
Though each his heavenly parent should inspire;  
The Muse instruct the voice, and Phoebus tune the  
lyre.

We know now, of course, that this strange prophecy of a thing so much in harmony with the dreams and aspirations of Vergil's own lofty soul was really a contemporary development through long ages of discussion of Hesiod's old doctrine of the Ages of Man. The belief in a return of the Golden Age was derived from the association of the Hesiodic account with the idea that the whole history of mankind was bound up in the theory of a cyclic return of the Universe to the same condition. The cyclic theory of the Ages evolved from this combination was worked over and over by the Greek philosophers, more especially Plato, the Stoics and the younger Orphics, into a form which was not only the basis of Vergil's account, but also of the Sibylline prophecies which he is known to have used.

Now, inasmuch as from the first the foundation of the most enlightened Christian thought, quite as much as the foundation of Vergil's thought, was that same gradual blending of the Orient with the speculations of the Greek philosophers, more especially Plato and the Stoics, which moulded the doctrine of the ages in its final form, it is no wonder that Christians who read these lines of the great poet saw in them a prophecy of the birth of Christ and of that regeneration of the world which his teaching promised.

We find this theory well established in the Christian writers of the fourth century. To them, of course, it was recommended not only by the poem, but by the contemporary opinion of Vergil himself, his lofty and blameless character and his proximity to the birth of Christ.

The most complete and circumstantial interpretation of this theory is found in an address given by Constantine the Great before a synod of Bishops near the beginning of the fourth century. The translation of the Eclogue in Greek verse which accompanies the address shows evident traces of the Sibyllists, at all events, in its present condition. The sense is not infrequently altered to harmonize it with the Christian interpretation. The Emperor found here a detailed prophecy of the coming of Christ. The Virgin who returns is Mary, the child sent down from Heaven is Jesus, the serpent that shall disappear is Satan, etc.

Granted that Vergil here actually was a prophet of Christ—and practically every one except Jerome did grant it—, the question now was to what extent was Vergil himself conscious of the fact. Constantine maintained that Vergil did know that he was foretelling Christ, but that he expressed himself darkly and introduced the heathen deities to avoid offending the pagans. Others thought that he did not comprehend the full significance of the Sibyl's prophecy, but that, though unconscious of it, he was, none the less, a witness to the faith.

After this idea of Vergil spread among the people, it assumed many curious forms. He was associated with the Sibyl herself. In the miracle plays of the Middle Ages he became almost a stock character along with the prophets of the Old Testament. He, also, frequently appears in ecclesiastical art as the prophet of Christ, usually associated with his famous line,

Iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.

One curious symptom of this theory was the secondary influence of it upon the spelling of the poet's name. Our earliest and best manuscripts, inscriptions and other authorities are practically unanimous that his name was spelled Vergilius. The spelling VIRGILIUS does not appear until the ninth century, and was never common. It was evidently due to an etymology which connected the name of the poet with *virgo*, i.e. the Virgin Mary, the *virgo* of the fourth Eclogue, when interpreted as a prophecy of the coming of Christ. In this way, the very name of the poet was shown to have been, in itself, significant of his destiny.

I may add that even to-day the discussion of the fourth Eclogue as a prophecy of Christ has by no means come to an end. Scarcely a year passes without some contribution to the subject.

So much for a scant outline of the literary tradition of Vergil in some of its most important phases.

The popular tradition of Vergil, i.e. the tradition of him that was built up by the people, originated in Italy, and more particularly in Naples and the immediate neighborhood. The origin of Corinthian bronze as related by Trimalchio, who was a man of the people (see above, page 180), will give us an idea of how far the Neapolitan tradition of Vergil was likely to be from any real facts of the poet's life, even though originally suggested by them.

This popular legend of Vergil was already well established at the end of the first century. But at that time it was strictly local, and except for an occasional passing reference—all of which have been collected and analyzed by Comparetti—does not come to the surface for over a thousand years.

In this, its most ancient form, the popular legend of Vergil has two distinct aspects. The first is exclusively Neapolitan, and was founded on the real facts of his biography and the local traditions connected with them. It is well known that Vergil had an especial fondness for Naples. It was there that he spent many years of his life and there that he wrote most of his poetry. Above all, he was buried there, and from the time of Augustus until the present day his tomb has always been an object of interest.

The second aspect, which Comparetti traces in part to Byzantine and possibly Semitic influences, is not exclusively Neapolitan, but is really to be classed with many similar legends which in later times grew up around various ancient monuments. The fusion of these two elements is due to a combination of the mediaeval idea that the wisdom of Vergil was superhuman and the ancient tradition of the Neapolitans

that he had an especial affection for their city. In this way, Vergil came to be considered the author of all works for the public good which could only be produced by unusually profound knowledge. From a host of examples I select the following.

Vergil built the city of Naples and its walls. Not content with this princely gift, he also presented the inhabitants with a model of their city inclosed in a glass bottle. So long as this was preserved, the city could never be taken. It is true that in 1194 the city was taken and destroyed by Conrad of Querfurt—but this was because the bottle had been cracked.

Vergil also made an immense bronze horse. Upon its back was a knight with a drawn bow, the arrow pointing at Vesuvius. For many centuries this work of art was undisturbed. Finally, a certain countryman with more curiosity than discretion clambered up and shot off the knight's bow for him. The arrow struck the peak of Vesuvius, a violent eruption followed, and ever since then the city has had to suffer from such calamities.

Vergil also placed a bronze fly upon one of the gates of Naples; as long as it lasted not a single live fly could enter the town.

Another legend tells us that the grave of Vergil was for many centuries unknown. Finally, it was miraculously discovered in the depths of a mountain, and his bones were transferred to a castle surrounded by the sea. Whenever they are exposed to the air a violent storm is produced. Conrad of Querfurt, writing in 1194, says—probably in perfect good faith—that he saw this marvel with his own eyes.

Such was the popular idea of Vergil which finally rose to the surface at the beginning of the twelfth century. The rise of modern Romantic literature in the vulgar tongues which took place at the same time, and the conception of Vergil which had long existed in the schools, received it with eagerness, proceeded at once to combine it with the scholastic tradition, and to develop and propagate the result along various literary lines.

The first and most important symptom of this second period in the development of the popular legend is the fact that the beneficent scholar and sage of the local tradition is now the greatest magician and necromancer of all antiquity. From scholarship and wisdom to magic and sorcery is an easy step in the popular fancy, and it was sure to be taken here as soon as the folk legend of Vergil was carried beyond Naples and freed from that local patriotism which effectually prevented anything maleficent from being associated with the traditional patron and friend of the city.

With the advent of this second stage, the old traditions of Naples were developed and amplified from the new point of view. The great master of the black art was also associated with a vast number of other legends and adventures more or less in harmony with this character but in no way connected with him previous

to that time. By an association of ideas not only natural but inevitable, the usual scene of these adventures is no longer the unimportant Naples, but the all-important Rome. We now hear of impregnable walls of brass, of a brazen head that foretold the future, of a tower with a magic mirror in which the most distant parts of the Empire could be seen, of a statue pointing to hidden treasures and of many other things all made for Rome by the necromancer Vergilius. Most of these legends, however, add nothing to our picture of him in this last stage of his traditional growth.

The one exception is a phase of Vergil's supposed career which belongs to this period in particular and was probably better known and more frequently mentioned than anything else about him except, perhaps, his function as a prophet of Christ. This was his experience with women. In this rôle he takes his stand with Aristotle, Hercules, Samson, David, Solomon, and other worthies of old with whom the mediaeval writers were fond of illustrating their favorite text that the heart of woman is deceitful and desperately wicked, and that the strongest man is a weakling and the wisest man a fool in the face of those wiles, for they have their origin in her innate depravity and owe their success to her infinite cunning and resource. As an old French poet of the thirteenth century says:

By woman Adam came to sin,  
By woman Vergil scorn did win,  
King David spake a doom unfit,  
And Solomon's unjust will was writ,  
Hippocrates a fool was crowned,  
And Samson his dishonor found.  
The aged Aristot  
Was found upon his hands and knees,  
Because, forsooth, 'twas Phyllis' whim  
To make a saddle horse of him.  
Who holds his own against a woman  
Is not yet born, and more than human!

Even more famous than the famous Lai d'Aristote last referred to is that story of Vergil to which the poet here alludes. It appears in a dozen different languages and in as many forms. The gist of it is as follows.

After Vergil had gained a world-wide reputation, he fell in love with the daughter of the Roman Emperor. She, however, not only did not return his love, but treated him with the utmost scorn and contumely. Finally, not being able to resist the temptation to make a fool of so great a man, she pretended to yield. He was to come on a certain evening to the foot of the high tower in which she lived. There he would find a large basket attached to a rope. Upon taking his seat in the basket and giving the signal, he would be drawn up to her room. Vergil came at the appointed time, found the basket, took his seat in it, and gave the signal. But when he had been drawn about half-way up the tower, the basket stopped, and the learned Roman could get neither up nor down. Next morning, the town found an absorbing topic in the discussion of a new wall decoration which had evidently been designed by the princess herself.

Late in the day the Emperor learned what had occurred and planned a terrible death for the lover as soon as he was let down. Then, apparently for the

first time, Vergil suddenly remembered that he was a magician, and used his power to escape, and then to plan and execute a revenge upon the lady, which originally had no connection even with the story just told.

In the course of time, so much of this legendary material had accumulated that men began to feel the need, as it were, of a new biography in which all of this valuable material should be included. Such an 'up-to-date' account of the great man was finally produced by an unknown author. It is called *Les Faits Merveilleux de Virgile*, and was widely read in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One or two of the opening statements will give an idea of its contents and method.

Vergil was the son of a knight of Ardennes, and was born soon after the foundation of Rome. When he was born the whole city trembled. While studying at the University of Toledo, he heard that his mother had been robbed of her property and he hastened to Rome to help her. Failing to obtain justice from the Emperor, he finally compelled him by magic to restore the property. Then he made peace with him, etc.

Those who are familiar with Vergil will observe that the statement I chose for quotation is, in reality, a characteristically fantastic reflection of the events in the poet's own life which the first Eclogue was supposed to commemorate.

So far as Europe in general is concerned, *Les Faits Merveilleux* is the last chapter in the tale of Vergil the Magician. But in the land of his birth, as was amply shown by Nutt in 1898 and by Leland in 1900, he still lives in many a curious anecdote and many a charming fairy tale.

It is significant to observe that in Italy, where the popular legend has never been subjected to literary influence, there is no trace of a maleficent side to the magic of Vergil. He is a wonderful scholar, sage and magician. At the same time, he is a man of most attractive character and personality, always going about to do good to others, benevolent as he is powerful, but with a keen sense of humor and fond of his little jest. In all of this we see clearly the features of the old Neapolitan tradition which is still alive and vigorous two centuries after its child beyond the Alps has passed away.

This finishes my brief and imperfect summary of a story which, when thoroughly understood in all its details, impresses me as one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of the world. Not the least remarkable feature of it is the almost literal truth of the assertion that if Vergil could gaze upon his own posthumous reputation he might behold there, as in a mirror, the whole story of European civilization for the last 1900 years.

We, ourselves, get a glimpse of the turmoil of change, struggle, and readjustment through which our ancestors have passed, when we look back over this strange story and realize that from the first century until nearly the eighteenth, a period of more than 1600 years, we hear of Vergil the scholar, Vergil the philoso-

pher and sage, Vergil the omniscient and the infallible, Vergil the prophet of Christ and the companion of the Sibyl, Vergil the magician and necromancer, even Vergil the lover, both deceived and deceiving. But we rarely hear of Vergil the poet, and, even when we do, there is no conception of those qualities of his surpassing genius which Petronius summed up once and for all in his brief but telling phrase—*ROMANUS VERGILIUS*.

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## REVIEW

The Writing of Narrative Latin. By Benjamin W. Mitchell. New York: American Book Company (1915). Pp. 240. \$1.10.

This book approximates a type which is rather familiar in England, but is almost unknown among the publications of this country—a Latin Composition book, namely, which is organized from the point of view of the English language. For the most part, however, the present volume has regard to principles of grammar common to the two languages rather than to the special peculiarities of the vernacular.

The main portion of the book consists of forty lessons, each containing on the average two or three pages of syntactical exposition, a vocabulary of twenty to thirty English words with Latin equivalents (fewer in the later lessons), and sixteen detached sentences of a line and a half each. It is based upon an actual Latin author only to this extent—according to the statement of the Preface the vocabulary <of Parts I and II> "comprises English equivalents for about 600 Latin words", of which 363 occur twenty or more times in the Gallic War, 177 ten to twenty times, and all except four at least once. The early lessons are confined to the vocabulary of the first chapters of Book I. While the subject-matter of the sentences is necessarily determined by the vocabulary, they do not reproduce the narrative of Caesar either in sequence or in fact. Also, the illustrations of syntactical principles are almost all taken from Caesar. And with very slight exceptions all prose syntax is included that is ordinarily required in a High School course.

The method throughout is deductive: statement of the principle of syntax is followed by examples in English and in Latin. Ample material for drill upon the syntax and for review is provided in the Exercises. Much emphasis is placed upon English synonyms: for this purpose each lesson vocabulary is followed by a supplementary paragraph containing in the form of footnotes from one to five synonyms each of many of the English words; in the Exercises the words that appear in the vocabularies and the supplementary synonymous expressions are used with equal freedom. If a pupil, in writing a sentence, does not recall the Latin equivalent of a word that has appeared in a previous lesson, he must ascertain from the Vocabulary Index <of English words> in the back of the volume in what lesson the word was first given; then, in case it is not the vocabulary word, he must look through